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Socratic pedagogy and citizenship formation in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher Education (HE) in England, it has been argued, has a public role in the continuation and sustainability of democracy (Watson 2014). This position is supported by Collini (2012); he argues that the university's role is to hold society's highest ideals to account. The university, as a public good, ought to ensure the continuation of critical, reflective and actively participating citizens in order to sustain a flourishing democracy (Giroux 2012). I argue that active democratic citizenship (ADC) can be fostered in a learning environment that enables critical reflection, the pursuit of truth and the idea of learners as citizens and producers of knowledge. Active learners, according to the ideas of Nussbaum (2010), can develop through the use of Socratic pedagogy. I make the case that Socratic pedagogy can be used in two ways: (1) in its traditional sense, which suggests students are inherently capable of thought, reflection and research, making use of dialogue as the way knowledge is initially drawn out; (2) in a progressive sense, in a way that reconceptualises students as active producers of knowledge who are accountable citizens, capable of pursuing truth as the basis of their intellectual lives and their lives as citizens.

This article critically analyses two types of citizenship: passive and active. From this analysis I make the case that ADC can support both a flourishing learning environment and a flourishing democratic community. Developing this discussion further, I explore Nussbaum's (2010) argument for the necessity of Socratic pedagogy in order to cultivate ADC. This discussion will also make connections with the Student as Producer (Neary and Winn 2009) approach, which requires similar character traits as active democratic citizens, in order for students and academics to work together to produce knowledge of social importance. This leads me to draw the conclusion that the university has an important role in the cultivation of ADC and that this can be achieved through the use of and the values in Socratic pedagogy, in both traditional and progressive senses. I now turn to the first element of this discussion: the analysis of passive and active students in HE and citizens in a democratic community.

Active and Passive Learners and Citizens

For the purposes of this discussion, I explore two conceptualisations of democratic citizenship: active and passive. The discussion analyses behaviours synonymous with active and passive participation in the learning environment: first, I explore passive participation and explain the significance of this using educational literature. Second, I explore active participation in order to find behaviours conducive to the flourishing of a HE learning environment and ADC. In this section I make use of fictitious vignettes (which summarise key behaviours discussed in literature) from a university lecturer's perspective, in order to illustrate the importance of these conceptualisations to the practice of the educator.

'Reflection' One: a session illustrating passive participation

I really struggled with them today. They attended the session; they filled out the forms, they made notes and one or two people asked questions concerning the content. I tried to make it fun and exciting. My hope was to get them engaged in the learning and enjoy the subject – they were not particularly bothered by this. There were more important things to do for some of the students. One student was on their tablet PC looking at clothes they seemed to want to purchase, another was taking a 'selfie'. I heard one student say that the next instalment of their student loan was going to be in shortly. The session came to a close when halfway through my conclusion; they were all packing up and getting ready to go – an obvious sign of wanting to be out of the door. I keep thinking to myself: "What is it that makes them behave like that?"

Many of the behaviours in the reflection are synonymous with passive participation (Astin 1999: 519-20). There is a distinct lack of engagement in the learning environment; little concern for the knowledge; a greater concern with money and material purchases than an investment in learning. This type of engagement would be problematic in the disciplines I teach; to gain a rich understanding, learners need to be active, to participate and to be critical of knowledge. These students (in the vignette) did not appear to attend to be active participants. This is not to blame students but as Lippitt and Larvor (2009) suggest, some students are pressured into attending university due to familial and social expectation, thus pressuring students to see their learning as solely instrumental for employment, which is likely to detrimentally affect learner engagement.

Passive participation, when discussed in the terms of citizenship, is appropriately described as civic liberalism, which conceptualises democratic citizenship as a legal status (they have certain rights), as opposed to the activity of citizenship (Leydet 2011). Individuals have certain 'rights' that they can exercise in their own interest if they choose to (Brighouse and Swift 2003). These rights are provided by the governing state, although there may be no strict obligation to exercise them. The defining features of civic liberalism as democratic citizenship have been identified by White (2013: 112): citizens take a laissez faire view on economics and the financial markets; individuals are passive in the sense they leave their political voice in the power of others such as government representatives (this is also exemplified in their views regarding economics); these individuals tend not to see themselves as part of a wider society or local community. The defining educational features of passive participation will now be critically analysed in the context of my practice.

Fish (2008) supports a passive approach toward HE and student learning. Universities, according to Fish, should be places where learners are inducted into disciplinary knowledge and gain skills in order to succeed in that field - nothing more, nothing less. His position emerges in reply to the promises universities make that learners will gain civic capacities by studying in these institutions. Fish's argument against this claim is that academics are only ever qualified to educate in their disciplines and universities are places of teaching and research only. Therefore, universities should not make false promises about what students will and will not gain. According to Fish, it is acceptable to academicise 'real world' matters such as bringing current affairs into an academic as opposed to a real world context and analyse arguments; it is not the place of the academic to use the lecture theatre as a 'Hyde Park Corner' to promote their ideological stance (Fish 2008: 13, 20 and 21).

At first Fish's position seems strong, but it ignores the centrality of the transformative experience of HE, which is only possible when learners actively participate in the learning (Mezirow 1990). It also ignores the political and ethical values an educator might have about active student engagement for good and meaningful learning (Campbell 2003). Fish's (2008) view conceptualises students as having a right to attend sessions and be 'educated' - to achieve the aims of their own interest (Brighouse & Swift 2003) – and the lecturer has an obligation to fulfil that right (Noddings 2012) - nothing more or nothing less should happen in the learning environment. One possible explanation of any passivity amongst learners is the economics of higher education, which burdens students with large debts. As a result some students are no longer able to participate fully in their studies, including socialisation activities (such as developing critical friendships, group learning and extra-curricular social activities, etc.) and intellectualisation activities (such as reading in preparation for sessions, further reading and research activities, field trips, etc.) that the university still offers but need to work to relieve their financial burden (Williams 2006).

In order to counter the passive conceptualisation of learners and citizens, Nussbaum (2010) and Giroux (2012) critique the effect of capitalism on democracy (neo-liberalism) and argue that if democracy is going to be the prevailing form of governing, then learners need to gain the disposition of criticality (Nussbaum 2010; Giroux 2012) and pursue truth as the main underlying value of all academic endeavours (Nussbaum 2010), which they claim will benefit global citizenship. Fish (2008) also supports the view that universities are places of research and critique; however, he does not support the view that research has any character-forming aim. Barnett (1997) provides a contrast, arguing that criticality is a disposition (part of an individual's character) cultivated and required in good learning. Nussbaum continues: the citizen who has the critical character, who is an active part of their community and society, who is capable of thinking of society's needs and not just their own, and who has the courage to pursue truth (even in adversity), is the active, not the passive, democratic citizen. Therefore, educational endeavours need to support the development of these capacities for active participation.

'Reflection' Two: an session illustrating active participation

I started the session by stating that they were not entitled to their opinions. An opinion, by its definition, does not require justification; they were required to express all of their views through reasoned argument, which requires reflection and justification. At first the students were shocked, but as they started to explore what this meant, they became proficient in articulating their position about the subject matter. They continued to explore, using this 'new' methodology', further subject matter and had quite consciously taken ownership of the learning as a group. In one process, they had been liberated from the dominance of unreasoned opinions, held to account over their ideas and views and taken responsibility for their learning as a group.

There is a greater sense of autonomy, not for self-interest, but for the interest of the community of learners in Reflection Two. The students were empowered to exercise their minds and voices as part of an activity where they take responsibility for their learning. They were learning to actively participate in the community despite being in an environment that demanded the same of the learners in Reflection One. Their active engagement is synonymous with the conceptualisation of active democratic citizenship, often referred to as civic republicanism.

The defining features of civic republicanism include: undertaking decision-making through deliberation (dialogue) to ensure citizens are not simply subjects to some higher power or authority (Leydet 2011); citizens proactively participating

in society for the greater good of society; citizens working toward the sustainability and growth of society (White 2013: 112). This model of citizenship predominantly concerns the idea of self-rule in the interest of others, i.e. the people govern the people (Leydet 2011), which is the definition of democracy: 'government by the people' (OED 2007). As we have seen by the passive description of a learner and citizen, there are different approaches to 'government by the people'; civic republicanism requires a greater sense of involvement than that of civic liberalism.

The learning within Reflection two is typical of how an active member of a community would behave, according to the features defined by civic republicanism. The students are expected, by the tutor's high expectations, to engage by giving reasons for their position and stance on events or actions taken. Such engagement is done for the greater good of the community so that others, such as those less confident or who may have otherwise struggled understanding the point being made, have an opportunity to participate in the discussion (Peterson 2009). This fulfils two key characteristics of a deliberative democracy – a democracy where citizens and government make decisions and create rules and laws through the process of dialogue. The first characteristic is reason-giving and the second is accessibility. These become characteristic of the community, classroom or state, as typified by the behaviours of individuals (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Living-out these characteristics require virtues.

The active student is courageous because they are required to overcome the fear of the unknown, such as gaining new knowledge about the world that authorities and peoples might not want them to find out (Nussbaum 2010; Macfarlane 2009). The active student has the virtue of respect (for others and themselves), according to Macfarlane, because respect implies positive action such as informing a participant that they can withdraw from research activity; thus the virtue of respect enables access to knowledge and that the individual/community can understand the reasons given for the action (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Resoluteness will also be a character trait as it enables the students and citizens alike to understand that the learning process and political process are long, requiring determination (Macfarlane 2009). Curiosity is an essential character trait in the learning process of the active student and subsequently the active citizen; they seek the answers to their questions and Aristotle would suggest this as an empowering trait as it does not drag the mind down (Davidson, 1892) i.e. they do not become deferential and do want to explore knowledge for themselves and not be told what the answer is. This then leads us back to truthfulness, with the addition of sincerity; both involving a commitment to doing the best to get to the truth and being accurate, a key requirement when undertaking research, as a learner and a citizen. This is an important point in the learning and political process, as representing the views of others in an unfair light can have far-reaching, detrimental consequences; therefore students are required to present the view of intellectuals they disagree with in an honest light in order to succeed within the university. This requires that the learners are humble so that they can be open to saying their position or stance was previously incorrect. The academic activity of the pursuit of truth as conceptualized by Nussbaum (2010) brings with it high expectations of learners who will eventually participate as active citizens.

There are significant differences in the conceptualisations of active and passive participation. These conceptualisations also have interesting ramifications for the flourishing and sustainability of democratic society. It is clear that active engagement in the learning community and in society requires certain character traits conducive to its, and individuals', flourishing. My concern is that if students do not have opportunities to think critically, to pursue truth and ensure clarity in their thinking and understanding, then democratic values will be undermined leaving other, more oppressive ways of control to grow (like neo-liberalism), which will not allow the pursuit of truth or cultivation of criticality. I therefore ask myself the question, "What type of learning environment would I like to create - one where passive participation is left to grow or one where active participation is fostered?" I answer "active". As Davidson (1892) stated, when an institution (the university) abandons its values, such as those of the critically reflective pursuit of truth, the institution will perish. I would go further and say that the activities and quality of the activities, originating from such institutions, will also perish as the characters of the academics would no longer be suitable for the pursuit of truth. To enable active participation, and all that it entails, a pedagogy that promotes these qualities will need to be (re)established.

Tradition and Progression: Socratic Pedagogy and Student as Producer

Socratic pedagogy arose from ancient Athenian democracy and particularly from one of its citizens. Socrates describes this dialectical mode of questioning, also known as the Socratic Method, as the midwife's trade where the teacher enables the 'birth of ideas' (Levett and Burnyeat 1997: Thea., 150b4-152a1). This pedagogy conceptualises individuals as inherently capable of critical reflection and the pursuit of truth, as well as being inherently capable of the cultivation of qualities (virtues) required to pursue truth. According to Nussbaum (2010), it is the pedagogy of active participation, which I am advocating to promote active participation in the learning environment. It will prepare students for a life of ADC (Giroux 2012) and it will uphold – not abandon – the values that underpin a flourishing democracy (Davidson 1892). This pedagogy has often been presented as a rather confrontational approach to teaching. I draw this conclusion from my own experience as a philosophy student. Here I reassert that Socratic pedagogy ought to be a collegiate, not a confrontational, approach to the pursuit of truth and research. The Student as Producer model helps in achieving a Socratic pedagogy that is collegiate.

Nussbaum (2010) makes an explicit connection between Socratic pedagogy and education for ADC. She argues that Socratic pedagogy supports the cultivation of the qualities of ADC i.e. criticality, reflection, resoluteness, determination in the pursuit of truth and courage to be able to exercise these in adverse circumstances. Furthermore Socratic pedagogy requires learners to be accountable for opinions, particularly when providing reasons and justifications for claims (Nussbaum 2010). The requirement of 'accountability' is also linked to Gutmann's and Thompson's (2004) ideas of accessibility and reason-giving, as a requirement of good deliberation in a democratic community. Furthermore, this pedagogy enables the significant development of character traits: criticality is, for example, developed through the dialogical approach, where one must actively engage with the thoughts of others, reflect on their own ideas and views, and have the courage to think differently.

A further pedagogical model connected with the role of the university is Student as Producer. This pedagogical model seeks to reconstruct the university as a place of collaboration, in which learners and academics work on projects of 'social importance' that are 'full of academic content and value while at the same time reinvigorating the university beyond the logic of market economics' (Neary and Winn 2009: 193). Debozy (2011) argues that it provides a more meaningful

approach to academic study and modes of examination where a tangible connection can be made with 'real world' issues, bringing the university to the world, instead of leaving the 'real world' at 'the door', as Fish (2008) advocates. When I have used Socratic pedagogy and Student as Producer in practice, I state (as noted above) that the students are not entitled to their opinions (which are by definition unreasoned and unexplored); instead I say they are only entitled to reasoned argument. Taking this model from Stokes (2012), I consider that it has liberated a number of students to become 'thinkers'. Pedagogical approaches that require the use of reason, Race (2010) suggests, engage learners and improve motivation, as they lead to students finding deeper meaning and significance in their learning and assessments. They position learners as active and capable members of the academic, as well as social, community, as indicated by Nussbaum (2010), Barnett (1997) and Giroux, 2012).

Whilst I did not educate these students with the aim of being more active citizens, I did want them actively to participate in the learning environment. In order for the learner to make connections with their learning and their role as citizens, I suggest it requires the provision of feedback that makes connections regarding their learning (knowledge creation) and the virtues of ADC. My suggestion is that such a feedback policy would (a) give students feedback that developed their intellectual growth, (b) provide them with a taxonomy connected to ADC, which (c) would enable the learners to make connections between their learning and their role as citizens. Therefore the learner would see connections with their active engagement and responsibilities in the learning environment and their engagement in their social communities.

The traditional and progressive (collegiate) forms of Socratic pedagogy require students to be critical, reflective, autonomous and research-focused (no matter how unpopular that knowledge might be); they clearly support the promotion of, and education for, ADC. They ensure that the tutor acts as a guide to learning and is not an authoritarian power. The dialogical approach serves as a conversation to seek the truth, cultivating the qualities of active participation and thus ADC, demonstrating that Socratic pedagogy provides a basis for good teaching that supports the cultivation of the qualities of the active participation and thus ADC.

Conclusion

The traditional and progressive models of Socratic pedagogy, I argue, enable tutors, and students, to create a learning environment based on the academic qualities of criticality, reflection, the pursuit of truth and knowledge creation. I suggest that this pedagogical approach is one way of empowering learners and academics to engage with, and in, the idea of the university as a public good. Whereas many other authors stop their discussions short of exploring how the democratic ideal of the university can be fostered in practice (Collini 2010 for example), I suggest that a learning environment that continues to challenge ideas and arguments and, furthermore, creates truthful knowledge - however controversial (Nussbaum 2010) - will provide a sustainable environment for the university as a public good. This holds true even in the adverse conditions of student debt and market forces (Neary and Winn 2009; Williams 2006), as people are continuously developing academic virtues, which they may use to critique these forces. Drawing together the qualities of a good academic community (the critically reflective pursuit of truth and the virtues required of this activity) and creating a connection between the traditional and progressive models of Socratic pedagogy, enables both tutor and student to increase expectations in the process of meaningful enquiry. Fostering active participation in the learning environment and the character qualities involved in this will enable learners to become active participants in, and members of, the learning community (Guttmann and Thompson, 2004). Practising pedagogies that foster active participation will only come about if the idea of the university as a public good is upheld and taken seriously by the critically reflective and knowledgeable individuals who operate inside this idea of the university.



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